

Dylan on Radio Unnameable 1966 by Peter Stone Brown

Sometime after midnight on the morning of January 26, 1966, I fell asleep as I usually did on weekday nights listening to a show on WBAI FM in New York City, called *Radio Unnameable* hosted by Bob Fass. I woke up an hour or two later and in the first few seconds of consciousness realized that Bob Dylan was on the air, in the studio taking phone calls. Let's just say I was wide awake really fast, and had a quick decision to make, which was whether to wake up my older brother sleeping in the next room. It was the worst possible week and night for this to happen. It was right in the middle of a week-long nightmare known as midyear exams, and I was supposed to take a math exam (the worst) a few hours later. I was 14 and in 9th grade. I decided that exams come and go, but Bob Dylan at the height of his rock and roll stardom taking phone calls was a one-time only event. I ran into my brother's room and said, "Get up! Dylan's on BAI."

And so for the next hour or so, we listened as Bob Dylan joked around and parried with callers who were not necessarily entranced. Dylan was accompanied by a few friends who you could hear laughing in the background, all using aliases, but it's a good bet that Al Kooper and Robbie Robertson were among them, since they had come to the show from the recording studio where Dylan had been working on a new single, "One Of Us Must Know (Sooner Or Later)."

Listening to the show 50 years later, many of the callers seem strange, and even though Dylan is clearly in good spirits and for the most part comical throughout, a lot of people hearing the show now would wonder what the fuss was about.

WBAI was and is a listener-sponsored station, part of the Pacifica Network which had two other stations, one in Berkeley, California and the other in Los Angeles. Many of the shows were political, and while BAI, leaned to the left, it did present all sides.

Bob Fass was a sometime actor, and *Radio Unnameable* was one of the first freeform radio shows. The show ran on weekday nights according to the WBAI program guide from midnight to exhaustion. Anything could and did happen on the show. It was underground radio for the city that never sleeps. I consider Bob Fass to be a radio genius. He rarely announced records, just played them mixing all kinds of music together with comedy records, poetry records and do sound collages often to make a point. For instance, a Lyndon Johnson speech about the Vietnam war would be accompanied by the sound of bombs dropping and Stormtroopers marching. Even though Fass rarely announced the songs he played, you somehow always found out what they were.

There were usually guests every night, musicians, actors, poets, comedians and people with political agendas such as Abbie Hoffman. Musicians would come by and play live. Two songs recorded on *Radio Unnameable* and heard by those who lived in the New York metropolitan area long before they were on record were "Alice's Restaurant" by Arlo Guthrie and "Mr. Bojangles" by Jerry Jeff Walker. When Walker's recording of the song was finally released in a highly produced version with strings, the reaction in New York was so negative that he included the *Radio Unnameable* version on his next album, *Five Years Gone*. Many, many other musicians appeared on the show.

Bob Dylan had played live on the show early in 1963. And Bob Fass had quite a few Bob Dylan recordings that weren't on any albums. This was quite a few years before bootleg records. One song he played several times a week was "Percy's Song." He also would play "I'll Keep It With Mine" and the electric version of "If You Gotta Go, Go Now." A few years later, songs from *The Basement Tapes* would be on *Radio Unnameable* before they were anywhere else.

Fass also organized a bunch of events, a "Be In" at Grand Central Station, a "Fly In" at the International Arrivals building at JFK airport and a "Sweep In" of the Lower East Side. The film *Radio Unnameable* documents all of this and more.

So to hear the show in the context of all above, along with the fact that New York was Dylan's home base, that Fass' audience was highly political, and of course in the context of Dylan moving from folk music to rock and roll, what happened that January morning makes a lot more sense.